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“How I Progress the Gothic Tale: Super Paper Mario and the Sublime”

T.S. Teofilo

“Gothic in contemporary popular culture is still recognisable as the Gothic of Walpole and Radcliffe, Shelley and Stoker – but it has also changed, evolving new contexts and new meanings, and requiring new forms of analysis and comment.” Spooner (2007)

Since its inception in the 18th century, the female gothic has rooted itself in a structure akin to Propp’s “Morphology of the folktale,” not often faltering from certain key elements. Major authors of female gothic, such as Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, the Brontës and more recently, Toni Morrison, all adhere to the situational narrative of the feminine gothic tale. The general pattern typically holds the following elements: Tyranny of the past, a stifled present, claustrophobia (in the broadest sense), exaggerated villains, the doppelganger, a family secret, a virtuous heroine spurned or sought by an evil man, a sublime setting (created to exaggerate sickening impressions within the psyche) and a happy ending. These elements appear without fail in the most canonical of feminist gothic, and as time has progressed, they have sought a place in other genres.

Just before the outbreak of the First World War, Eleanor H. Porter began motivating children with a new color of gothic fiction. Her work, *Pollyanna*, *The Glad Book*, pulled the gothic heroine out of the submissive castle and into the subjective American landscape. This move marked a long-running tradition for the gothic to break into children’s media. Books, films and TV shows allow children to experience the Gothic in an arena suited to their tastes, and now the female gothic novel has made its way to the video game. *Super Paper Mario* for Nintendo Wii houses all of the basic components of a feminine gothic novel in its storyline, including Ann Radcliffe’s convention of an ever-present storm on the horizon. This game actually sends the player through all the modes of the genre, and surprisingly, our hero Mario is not the champion of the tale! What I present here is a textual analysis of the gothic modalities in *Super Paper Mario*, looking at the storyline introduced in game play that cannot be skipped over, and must be progressed for play to continue and how it enhances the gothic form. This storyline introduces Lord Blumiere and Lady Timpani, two lovers who have been torn apart by forces beyond their control.

How have developers chosen to use this storyline for the latest in the 20+ year old game platform? According to Korff-Vincent’s “The Mirror and the Cameo” from Fleenor’s *The Female Gothic*, “What constitutes a Gothic novel is not so much elements as attitude - the feeling of fear, the concept of multiple selves...the search not for a “they” but for an “I”” (153). *Super Paper Mario*’s “I” is the player. As the player moves ahead in this game, he helps develop the tale of Lady Timpani and Lord Blumiere. The project at hand focuses on how the Gothic genre continues to flourish in popular culture. The prevalence of the Gothic in popular culture strives to fuel the origins of the genre, making a plea for social change and renewed social focus.

Our Virtuous Heroine, the Good Lady Timpani

An early anonymous critic of the Gothic asked in 1798:

Can a young lady be taught nothing more necessary in life, than to sleep in a dungeon with venomous reptiles, walk through a ward (wood) with assassins, and carry bloody daggers in their pockets, instead of pin-cushions and needle-books?” (224)

Our heroine Tippi is much like this description. She is charged with the task of helping Mario defeat enemies and disclosing secrets that lead to the salvation of the universe. This maiden is portrayed in *Super Paper Mario* as a butterfly-like “Pixl,” a guide-friend who can perform certain actions to progress the game. Tippi’s power is that of revealing “tattles” about enemies and discovering hidden pathways through the worlds in *Super Paper Mario*.

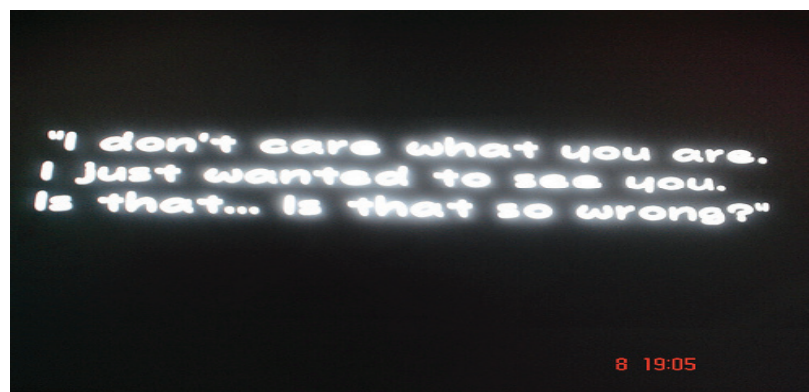
Near the beginning of the tale, players learn that Tippi used to be human, and was turned to a Pixl by the wizard Merlon in order to save her life. Later, it is revealed that Tippi is “Lady Timpani,” a beautiful maiden who was rejected by the family of her beloved and banished to wander between dimensions for all eternity. Since the town of Flipside (where Merlon resides) rests neither in nor out of any one dimension, Timpani finds herself brought back from near death in this quaint city. Swan’s “Gothic drama in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*” talks of the Gothic heroine’s characterization relying on self-division and an experience of deep loneliness based on past experiences. Tippi is no exception. She has been divided, not necessarily by herself, between her human and her new pixilated forms. She expresses loneliness and loss, but does not know why. The persona “Timpani” is lost for the moment, and Tippi knows something about her has changed, although she will not comprehend what until she reunites with her former lover, Lord Blumiere, later in the tale.

According to Wallace:

The Gothic heroine (and her reader) has to convince herself that the man she has to marry in order to establish a separate identity, is not, in fact, a Bluebeard who will victimise her as her mother was victimised, but a ‘real man’ who will love and protect her. (59).

It is not until in his castle, seeing him near death that Timpani realizes her love for Blumiere is still priority. Here lies the connection of discovering Lord Blumiere, transformed to Count Bleck, was a “Bluebeard,” but is no longer. The virtues of his wish to destroy himself so that Timpani can keep living are key to the heroine’s rekindled love. Tippi must restore her love with Blumiere in order to set the world right, and in the true virtuous nature of the Gothic heroine, she sacrifices herself to be cast into oblivion so long as her love is by her side. This virtue pays off in the end, as will be shown in a later section of this analysis.

The typical Gothic heroine is the most beautiful, fairest, most all-around good young woman in a family of either normal, but wealthy, or extraordinarily decrepit kin (for more on the definition of “Gothic heroine,” see Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*). For Lady Timpani, her acquiescence to the typical female Gothic heroine is shown first in the mysterious description of how she and Blumiere met. Although at this point in the game, a player may not know the identities of “Timpani” and “Blumiere,” a message is flashed in bold, white letters on a black screen:



This message continues by sharing that Timpani has come to see Blumiere because he has

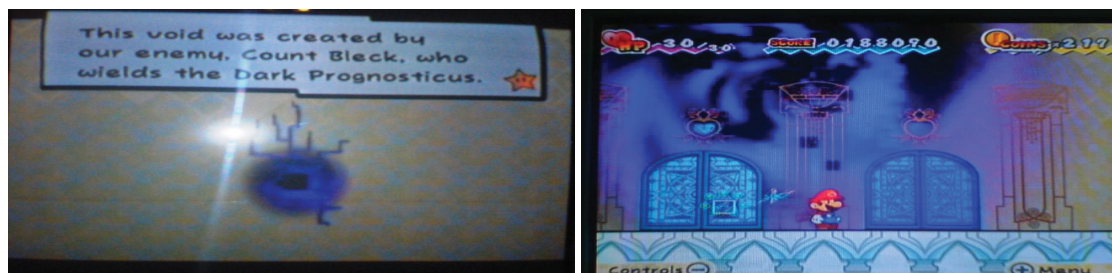
fallen from a cliff and is injured. Lord Blumiere has at this point been identified as a member of the “Dark Tribe,” a race of non-humans who control all the evil forces of the universe. From this fact, one can imagine that the meeting of Timpani and Blumiere is much like that of Beauty and the Beast in the dungeon of Beast’s darkened castle. Unlike Beauty, however, Timpani never rejects Blumiere for his appearance or relation to supposed evil. She helps and nurtures him in his pain, and the two fall in love.

Timpani’s virtue and honor allow her not only to fall for Blumiere in his injured and presumably hideous state, but also give her the courage to stop the destruction of the universe by fighting at Mario’s side throughout most of *Super Paper Mario*. Although at times she is kidnapped by villains or still with Mario off screen while another hero (Luigi, for example) fights, Tippi’s powers aid in the heroes’ quest. This fact contributes to Tippi’s heroine status as well, and considering the player initially assumes Tippi has no recollection of her former life, she must be necessarily devout by choice alone, rather than by reason of previous circumstance.

The Sublime Destruction of the Universe

Burke defines the Sublime as painful, terrifying and violently emotional experiences and landscapes. Horrifying scenery abounds in the feminine Gothic, and in *Super Paper Mario*. The first sublime setting in the game is shown as Mario and Luigi are sent out to find Princess Toadstool, who has been kidnapped. This sets up a miniature gothic tale, alluding to the greater story to come, one of a kidnapping and a heroine (Peach) being married to a tyrannical ruler (Bowser) by force. Mario and Luigi assume that Princess Peach has been taken to Bowser’s castle, which is introduced to the player by a macabre tune familiar from *Super Mario Bros. 3* and a gloomy, storm-laden hillside hosting a tumultuously foreboding castle. For any seasoned Mario player, this castle is noticeably more villainous than the norm, and it creates emotional distress for the player (and Mario) since it seems a fight with Bowser will ensue. This first instance of the Sublime is merely a preview for the drastic murals of fear painted on the backdrop of the worlds Mario and friends must visit and conquer.

In *Gothic Fiction / Gothic Form*, Haggerty sees the Sublime in the Gothic as a simple event described so masterfully that it maximizes the horror being displayed and also explains that “the sublime takes a person out of herself as a way of expanding who she is...”(34). The Sublime not only affects the characters partaking of its splendiferous terror, but also the reader/player involved. Sublime terror can be called the element that released Timpani from her memory loss: After a large crack in the void created by the evil Count Bleck transports the heroes back to Flipside, Tippi’s mind wanders during a conversation with Merlon and she blurts out, “Blumiere.” This is the first obvious recollection Tippi has regarding her former self, and it was charged by the drastic transformation of the landscape. Haggerty’s description of a simple event described thoroughly is present in the darkened, flashing sky that progressively becomes more ominous as the game moves forward:



DaVinci-Nichols states, “Gothic novels rely on place...to evoke the terror of Gothic themes...”

tenebrous settings and mysterious places victimize heroines as fully as do villains...” (187). This account of Sublime setting is witnessed in *Super Paper Mario* through the foreboding sky, and also through the heroine’s kidnapping. In a chapter of this game called “The Bitlands,” Mario and company must rescue their new friend Tippi in order to continue the quest to save the universe. Tippi has been taken and caged by a raving fanatic who obsesses over robotic butterflies. Her cage is small and she is lonely and terrified, so when Mario, Peach, Luigi and Bowser rescue her, Tippi is so gratified she produces an item the group needs to progress to the next chapter: One of the 8 “Pure Hearts” that can work together to weaken the “Chaos Heart” that is creating the void in the sky.

The “Pure Hearts” can only be created from real love, and the heroine shows here that her sublime entrapment was so overwhelming she has learned to love her rescue party to the highest possible level. The Sublime in *Super Paper Mario* induces fear at inception and release at its end. The Koopa castle foreshadows the coming void in the sky and Tippi’s cage personifies fear of not realizing her past.

Koopas Can’t Breathe: Claustrophobia

Claustrophobic moments in this text overwhelm the player and characters in order to showcase the impact choices have on the game and to a larger degree, society. This is as the traditional feminine gothic has governed since 18th century Britain, when Gothic women writers were fighting for social change in reality through their novels (see “Introduction” in *A Sicilian Romance* by Ann Radcliffe). This fight for change took the shape of a beautiful heroine being locked in a small closet, usually with the choice to flee into danger or stay and remain eternally unhappy. The tales almost always end with the heroine fleeing and finding ultimate joy, much like that experienced in Roald Dahl’s *Matilda*, as the young girl is adopted by the beautiful heroine and they live together “happily ever after.”

Cohen’s “Kitschen Witches” remarks that Gothic classics hold helpless victims struggling against tyrannically corrupt institutions, families and governments. In *Super Paper Mario*, the end of all worlds is approaching rapidly and the Sublime engulfs the heroes as they trudge through dangerous chapters questing toward the unknown. Tippi’s beloved, in the form of Count Bleck, has minions who at times create a claustrophobic atmosphere for the journeyers. These henchmen are a part of the disorderly government Cohen mentions, as their drive is to create as much chaos for Mario and company as possible. Most notable of these is Mimi, the mimic. In one chapter of the game, the hero crew is sent by Merlon to the home of a sorceress named Merlee who is said to know the location of a “Pure Heart.” When the heroes arrive, Merlee is not who she seems; she is Mimi in disguise. At the end of this chapter, the heroes are faced with two Merlees and forced to decide which is real. This mischief invokes a claustrophobic, choking terror for the heroes and player, as the wrong choice could mean the game is over and lost.

Also in this Gothic mode, Becker talks of enclosure, explaining that the heroine is encased in an environment that was initially thought of as safe, but has now become a prison. Merlon imprisoned Tippi in her pixl form to protect her from death, but as her feelings for Blumiere return to her memory, cut scenes reveal the heroine agonizing over the loss of her original form. In the end of the tale, Timpani (not knowing the outcome) takes the most powerful step from this suffocating predicament as possible: She agrees to put herself in danger to save the worlds. This choice bodes well for the heroine, as in any traditional female gothic tale. Due to her virtuous choice, Tippi is returned to her human form of Lady Timpani.

Luigi, Mr. L, Bleck and Blumiere: Doppelgangers

Carrington explains that the doppelganger causes one to question the barriers between life,

death and identity. This sentiment is best realized in the characters of Blumiere and Count Bleck. After Lady Timpani was ousted by Lord Blumiere's father, Blumiere sought solace in an evil book held sacred by his tribe: *The Dark Prognosticus*. Knowing he could never have Timpani back, Blumiere became so distraught that he let the darkness of the book take over and convert him into Count Bleck. Blumiere began to realize through the rationale of his double that using the *Dark Prognosticus* to destroy all worlds would be his only salvation from loneliness. This justification explores Carrington's claim that doppelgangers cause potentially irrational shifts in the comprehension of life and death. Blumiere's alter-identity now examines the relevance of life for anyone because of his loss. Wolstenholme remarks that doubling becomes privileged over sequencing in the female Gothic; a concept that would not permit the above understanding of Blumiere as doppelganger to take place. Sequencing requires the reliability of time, and would not allow for flashbacks revealing the former self that Count Bleck is hiding.

Many doubles occur in *Super Paper Mario*, such as the evil Mr. L, a hypnotized Luigi that Mario must fight on several occasions. Often in the Gothic, as Haggerty iterates, the doppelganger will be a direct reflection of the original self, showing the attributes opposite those of the real. Much like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Luigi and Mr. L are two separate individuals in one body who are unaware of each other. Similar to this relationship are the towns of Flipside and Flopside. The two are exact mirrors of one another and the only residents who know of both towns' existences are Merlon and his Flopside double, Nolrem. Unlike Bleck and Mr. L, Flopside is not dangerous to Mario, Tippi and their fellow adventurers. The town is more akin to Wolstenholme's discussion of the double as counterpart. In this case, rather than affecting the other, each double resides independently, knowing of the other's existence but choosing to stay at a distance until proven necessary.

Tippi and Lady Timpani also function as doubles, but in a way that remains untouched in current research. The only example I can extend comes from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. This novel expresses the concept of "rememory," events that are so powerful to the mind, remembering them takes a character back to that moment. In Morrison's work, this leads the character to have a sublime intervention of thought, where remembering the memory that was thought to be lost overcomes the character and causes stifling anguish as well as euphoria. Since Tippi has lost her former self, each piece she gains back reminds her that she is a doppelganger of her previous form. Tippi's memory sharpens as *Super Paper Mario* progresses, leading to increasing episodes of "rememory," and finally the moment mentioned earlier where she sacrifices herself, only to regain human form.

Doppelgangers in this Mario game are at nearly every turn. Their presence increases the affect of sublime scenery and claustrophobic atmospheres. Count Bleck is the self-chosen double of *Super Paper Mario*, while Mr. L is the Mr. Hyde. Flopside and its residents constitute a model of the double that does not disclose itself or cause harm, and Merlon/Nolrem interact briefly, but generally remain aware of one another without communication. Tippi and Lady Timpani are the hardest doubles to place, but as seen through Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, this duo within one self reflects the feminine Gothic ideal of the doppelganger.

The Tyranny of Bleck's Past and Tippi's Stifled Present

It is important to note here that much as Mary Shelley never named Frankenstein's monster, Lord Blumiere and Lady Timpani were never shown in their true forms. The player knows Timpani is human and Blumiere is not, and this fact is what Count Bleck's past is based on. Wheatley explains:

...the female Gothic narrative often centres on a hidden family secret which necessitates the heroine's position in her new home; these secrets make up the back-story of the

drama and the heroine's need to uncover them propels the narrative." (108).

Did Tippi agree to help Mario in hopes of uncovering her past through the narrative? This is possible, but never stated directly. What is known: Blumiere/Count Bleck's family secrets...

1.) Blumiere's father is against "dark tribe" / human relationships. 2.) *The Dark Prognosticus* is something of a family heirloom in Blumiere's tribe. These two facts show the gothic mode of tyranny for the hero and heroine. Blumiere as hero is forced to relinquish his love, never to have her again. At this juncture, Timpani, even with memory loss, is on a mission to recover her past, which will lead to uncovering the secret of Count Bleck.

In Fleenor's *Female Gothic*, Joanna Russ claims that the super-male counterpart to the heroine of a feminist Gothic tale is perceived as either being in love with the heroine, hating her, using her or trying to kill her (32). In the case of *Super Paper Mario*, Count Bleck is acting on at least two of these. He is directly in love with Timpani, even though he thinks she is no longer in the world, but he is also indirectly trying to kill her as he attempts to destroy existence. This stifling of Tippi's present, although unknown to her through most of the game's storyline, impedes on her heroism. It is indirectly Blumiere's fault that she is in pixl form, and it is Bleck's fault that she must spend her time fighting for the lives of all civilization as a brave heroine. With these two facts engulfing her thoughts as her memories return, Lady Timpani is continually stifled by Lord Blumiere's past. According to McMillen-Conger, this suppression ultimately builds the heroine into her best form and leads to reconciliation, tranquility and an "advantageous marriage." Indeed, *Super Paper Mario* comes full-circle from the miniature Gothic tale at its beginning to conclude as all female gothic tales do, with:

The Happy Ending

Just before Mario's final battle against a minion-turned-rogue of Count Bleck's team, Dimentio, Tippi and Bleck discuss their feelings for one another, realizing that they have the tool to help Mario defeat Dimentio: Their love. Realizing that it may mean their death because of the power, Count Bleck and Tippi join together on an altar and confess their undying love. This act causes the two to dissipate into nothing, but also conjures a new set of 8 "Pure Hearts." As Free discusses, we create our own evils, the ones needed for current culture, and this claim explains that Bleck was no more a villain than the others in this tale. He was simply a misguided, lovesick man who fought until the end to prove his love for Timpani.

Hawkins explains that feminist critics of the Gothic often accuse the literature of giving a conservative view of a woman's destiny. For *Super Paper Mario*, it was Tippi's decision to sacrifice herself with Count Bleck, and she even made the suggestion. The feminine Gothic empowers women to act as righteous and live as dangerously as the heroines of the tales. Here it must be noted that after the credits for this game roll through to the end, a couple is seen holding hands on a hilltop. Speculation notes that these figures are Lady Timpani and Lord Blumiere, living happily, far away. This is proof that Hawkins' assertion is lacking in proof, since Tippi made the decision to endanger herself and her love, and in the end, her strength helped her survive.

Morgan's "Toward an organic theory of the Gothic" reminds us that reading the Gothic makes a reader appreciate the fact that she is not encased in a tomb, a concept that relates to the importance of this genre. The Gothic basically strives to express how bad things could be if they weren't this good. Mario players would not immediately call this analysis the revelation of *Super Paper Mario* as Gothic. As Martin puts it in her work "Gothic Scholars Don't Wear Black," Gothic studies and the subculture of the Goths are not necessarily aligned. In reality, it is likely a player will see the storyline's pattern as similar to other works she has read or seen, but she will not have a name for it. As BIGSuperMarioFan said in a message board post outlining Blumiere and Timpani's story, "It was so romantic that I remembered everything!!!!" Here, I have exposed the Gothic elements of

Super Paper Mario in order to classify the most likely reading as that of someone who is aware of the tropes of Gothic literature, even though she may not realize the historical context of recognizing the patterns or have the language to talk about it as such.

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